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THE SCHOOL REVIEW

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THE READJUSTMENT OF THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM.

One of the most important subjects of discussion in the educational world at present is the school curriculum. It is strongly urged that there is great waste somewhere in our educational work. What is done in the college and secondary school seems to take more time than this utilitarian age can afford for the results obtained ; and if there is to be a place in the scheme of education for those studies which count specially for culture, some method of economizing time must be found. The colleges put the responsibility for this economy upon the secondary schools ; while the secondary schools, feeling that they are already loaded with work, charge the waste to the inefficiency of primary instruction. It is probable that the blame can be distributed all along the line, and the present agitation for a readjustment of the school curriculum will no doubt avail to improve the character of all our educational work. Though the discussion thus far has been sometimes acrimonious and sometimes unreasonable, and those who have the least acquaintance with the real conditions under which the work is done have been the loudest in affirming what our schools can be expected to accomplish, yet the widespread and vigorous criticism has caused educators to study all sides of the question with such care that we may reasonably look for a programme which, though it may not be modified as much as many ardent reformers desire, will be of a character that can be fairly defended.

There is some injustice in the indiscriminate charge of waste made against our primary and secondary schools by those who do not understand the limitations under which they work, or who

fail to appreciate the value of the time element in the lives of ordinary children. These schools are mostly public schools, and they have the characteristics of the American life which created and supports them. There is a certain amount of waste in the educational life of the average pupil against which all grades of schools in common have to contend. In spite of the greater maturity of mind of the college student, it is a fair question whether pupils do not waste more time in college than they do in the secondary school. Probably the best rejoinder to President Eliot's famous attack on the grammar schools would be a careful statement of the work which a student is actually compelled to do in order to get the degree of bachelor of arts at Harvard College. As educators, we are all apt to overestimate the difficulty and importance of our own work and to underestimate the work of others. I have never known a teacher in a public school who felt thoroughly assured that the work of the grade below was properly done. We should remember that there is a certain amount of imperfection in our school work which cannot be justly charged anywhere, but which belongs to the general weakness of human nature.

The most important subject of discussion at present seems to be the grammar school curriculum. A few years ago college faculties were finding much fault with the character of the work done in the secondary schools; they claimed that good work could not be done in the colleges because pupils came to them so poorly prepared. The result was, in the first place, to raise the grade of the work done in the secondary schools, and then, to arouse preparatory instructors to defend their work as the best that they could accomplish under the circumstances. It has come to be understood that the better preparatory schools are doing about all the work that can reasonably be expected of them, though whether this work is most wisely chosen and most economically done is certainly still an open and an important question. The burden of criticism, however, has been shifted to the grammar school.

The grammar school is a natural product of American conditions; it has not been imitated from foreign models. Even in details, it has borrowed little from the schools of England, France, or Germany. It is, therefore, the most firmly fixed of any part of our educational system; and special care should be taken lest

it become stereotyped. That there is a call for a reform and development of the grammar school curriculum, every thoughtful educator will allow. The high school and the college have received an undue share of attention and have attained proportionately a better development. The enriching, if not the shortening, of the grammar school course is our most important educational question. It is evident that changes in the curriculum of the grammar schools, to be readily accomplished and widely adopted, must aim at a natural development and not at an overthrow of existing arrangements. It is easy to make out an ideal programme only to find that it is opposed to the strongest convictions of another set of men, and that its realization is impossible under existing conditions. There are arrangements which it is inexpedient to attempt because the labor necessary to secure them is out of proportion to their value.

The problem of the grammar school is one of the most difficult in the whole range of education because the elements which enter into it are so many. The grammar school is a public school and is supported by taxation ; it must, therefore, be in touch with the community ; its work must commend itself to the majority of its intelligent constituents. It has to be adapted to a wide variety of dispositions, characters, and mental constitutions—a range wider than that to be found in the high school or the college. It has to regard the great variety of circumstances in life for which its instruction must be adapted. It has to keep in mind the fact that the majority of its pupils will drop out of school even before its course is completed, and that its work must do the best possible for them under the circumstances. It has to have special regard for the pedagogical value of the subjects which it teaches. Its period is so short, and it furnishes the entire education of so many of its pupils, that it cannot afford to make mistakes here ; while the amount of real knowledge of the comparative disciplinary and culture value of different studies which is possessed by educators is surprisingly small. There are many opinions as to what the results of teaching certain subjects ought to be, and there is very little dispassionately gathered knowledge as to what the results of teaching such subjects actually are.

A good illustration of how easy it is for persons who are not familiar with the work of our grammar schools to overestimate the work which can be done in them is shown by the changes re-

cently recommended by the Association of Officers of the Colleges of New England. There is much to be said in favor of each of the changes proposed. But the attempt to carry out all of them at the expense of arithmetic, English grammar, and geography, as the association recommends, would practically result in throwing those studies out of the curriculum. It would not be difficult to predict the fate of a reformer who graduated pupils from the grammar school who were not reasonably well posted in arithmetic, who had so little knowledge of English that they could not explain the structure of an ordinary sentence, or who knew practically nothing of the world in which they live.

The grammar school course is being pulled in two directions. One class of reformers wish to enrich it with subjects which they conceive have a practical bearing, such as drawing, manual training, book-keeping, history, civics, and literature; while another class wish especially to shorten the time necessary to complete the college course, and would therefore add Latin, French or German, algebra, and geometry. It would not be difficult to enrich the grammar school course with any or all the subjects proposed by lengthening the time devoted to it. But we do not want to lengthen the grammar school course; it is too long already. It will be better to postpone as many subjects as possible to the high school, where they can be taught under more favorable circumstances. The subject which marks the completion of the grammar school course is arithmetic. Under present conditions, the problem is, What subjects can be taught satisfactorily before the pupil finishes arithmetic?

A great deal of time is devoted in our schools to teaching arithmetic, probably more than is really needed. Improved methods of instruction and a wise excision of things which it is not necessary to teach, at least at this stage of the pupil's progress, will save time for other important subjects. We should remember, however, that it was a sound pedagogical instinct that gave arithmetic the place of honor in the grammar school. Arithmetic is the substantial drill subject of the common school course. It may have taken up too much time, but the time has not been wasted. The pupil who has studied advanced arithmetic has been obliged to do good solid mental labor; he has been compelled to reason to the full extent of his ability; he has gained some substantial mental discipline. Above all he has

been compelled to reason about concrete facts, about things with which he will be more or less concerned in his future life. Although the problems of arithmetic are not always practical in the sense of being like those which the pupil will have to solve in his work in life, they have a practical side in that they accustom him to dealing with the same kinds of quantities under circumstances bearing some resemblance to what he may expect to meet in the future. This practical character of the arithmetic work appeals to the average boy and to the average parent. We may regret that pupils who went farther in the course wasted some time over arithmetic, but we ought not to forget that a vast number of boys have been kept in school because of not having mastered arithmetic thoroughly.

We may expect to save some time from arithmetic in our revised curriculum; but zealous reformers have overestimated the amount of this saving. No arrangement of the work can make arithmetic a very easy study for the average child; and it is well for the child's education that such is the case. While it is proposed to put into the curriculum a variety of subjects in which the teacher is to do much of the pupil's labor—subjects which are to be so carefully prepared beforehand by the teacher that the child can appropriate them with little mental effort,—it is refreshing to know that there is one subject which he must master for himself slowly, sometimes painfully, and always with much labor. If arithmetic stands in the way of drawing or music, of German or Latin, of book-keeping or civics, let us be thankful that it is an obstacle which will develop the sound mental muscle that is needed for the work further on.

Many college instructors have urged that a pupil in the grammar school should commence French, or German, or Latin, or preferably two of them, at the age of ten or soon after. No reform has been more vigorously advocated than this, and there is none which it would be more difficult to bring about. It would be opposed by a deep and wide-spread popular prejudice,—a prejudice springing partly from ignorance, partly from a feeling of patriotism, and partly from opposition to the increased expense. There is also a strong pedagogical argument against the plan. It is of advantage to pupils who propose to devote much time to language study to begin it as early as possible. But for pupils who will leave school during, or at the end of, the grammar

school course, the study of a foreign language is certainly an undesirable waste of time. The French or German taught in the grammar school will be only a smattering, taught largely by conversational methods, yielding little mental discipline, and of no practical value to the pupil who will not pursue those languages further. A little elementary study of a foreign language by young children will not be of material help to them in learning how to use their own language well. It would be far better to devote the time to the systematic study of English. The poorly mastered French or German will soon drop out of their lives, while proper English study will be fruitful in every mental life capable of bearing any fruit at all. The reasons which have availed to give the modern languages so important a place in European schools have much less weight here. We are but slightly affected by the commercial and social influences which are very powerful with them. The modern languages are a much more practical subject for the European than for the American, and it is their practical value that has crowded them into the lower grades of the European schools.

The class of reformers who have turned to a comparison with foreign schools for proof of a great waste of time in the American grammar school course have not reasoned carefully. Their reasoning is largely based upon the number of hours devoted to different subjects in the school curriculum, and upon the fact that more subjects are there commenced in the lower grades. But in foreign schools the teacher works with the pupil to an extent that is not usual in this country, and the comparison of the number of hours devoted to a subject must be made with caution. The real question is, whether at the end of the eighth or ninth grade the well taught American boy is inferior to his foreign competitor in self-reliance, in power to attack work of an entirely different character from what he has been doing, and in general flexibility of mind. The just comparison is between the characters produced by the two methods of training; and upon this subject we have surprisingly little information.

Those branches of natural science which specially cultivate the powers of observation have been unduly neglected in the grammar schools. It would seem that quite an amount of natural science could be added to the curriculum without greatly increasing the work of the pupil, its freshness making it a rest to him

from his other labors. One great reason why elementary science has been neglected in the lower grades is because it is not a good subject for examination. A child cannot make a good showing in an examination set by a third party without having the subject thoroughly drilled into his memory. Superintendents and school committees who wanted to test the work of their teachers at every turn, who must have some palpable results for all the labor of the school room, found that there was no way of testing a slightly increased power of observation, and that their examinations in natural science resulted in making it a purely cram subject. With better teachers, we shall be able to trust some portion of the work in their hands without expecting them to make a show of it on examination.

What pupils who are to go no further than the grammar school most need to know is a question which it is not safe to answer dogmatically. It is easy to make out a list of subjects which suit well a preconceived theory, and which can be defended by good reasoning from assumed premises. Herbert Spencer's reasoning as to what knowledge is of most worth seems to the ordinary reader to be very good logic. The strongest argument against the scheme of education which he recommends is the fact that when tried it is difficult to get as good results from it as from the system which he strongly condemns. Still, though it is not possible to determine at present what would constitute the most desirable grammar school course, we can see what is its most natural and probable line of development.

Unquestionably the greatest improvement in the grammar school curriculum can be made in the department of English. For the child whose education is to be completed in the grammar school, the subject is of prime importance. Because the English language has few inflections, it has been erroneously argued that it is easy to master. Not only are its pronunciation and orthography more difficult for natives than are those of any other cultivated language, but a good English expression in speech and writing is very hard for most persons to acquire. The length of time required to attain any satisfactory results in English has been underestimated by those who have not had considerable experience in teaching the subject. There are also so many disintegrating influences at work upon our language, that there is special need for our schools to uphold the standard of sound

English speech. A good beginning can be made in the study of literature. While the child is learning to read he can be brought in contact with good literature and have his taste cultivated at the same time that he is enlarging his vocabulary. When he has mastered the mechanical part of learning to read, the main effort of the school should be to enlarge his field of mental vision. The vast number of pupils who go out directly from our grammar schools into life need more than anything else some knowledge of and taste for what is best in literature. This will be a multiplying influence for good through all their future lives, and the school cannot afford to let any mere information subject stand in the way of it.

It is required by law in most states that physiology and hygiene shall be taught in the grammar schools; the reviving spirit of Americanism has demanded a place for American history and for civics; while drawing and music have made good a claim for greater recognition. If all these subjects are reasonably well taught in the grammar school, the course would seem to be pretty well enriched without the addition of a foreign language. Still, it would be well to have the experiment of adding one or two foreign languages to the course tried in American schools and under American conditions; and it is fortunate that some schools which are favorably situated for it are willing to make the trial. In the meantime, the great majority, realizing that the grammar school is the only training school of the great mass of American citizens, will go on developing a curriculum suited to the more pressing demands of American life.

One point, which reformers have often overlooked, must not be forgotten in this discussion. We may give young children by skillful teaching some more knowledge than they now get; we may quicken their powers of perception, and give them a greater power of expression; but we cannot in the same ratio increase their power of reasoning and of independent thought. Nature will not hurry the child's physical development for us; and, in the same way, she will not let him be brought to intellectual manhood before his time. A wise arrangement of the school curriculum, therefore, will regard not only the things which we most desire the child to learn, but also the work which is most in accordance with his present mental development. With the great majority of children, we shall never be able to do all that we think we ought to do in the grammar school.

If we do not come in the course of a few years to some understanding of what constitutes a good high school course, it will be because we cannot interpret the teachings of experience. Almost every study and every method of instruction is on trial somewhere. The American high school has much greater freedom of movement than the grammar school, and it has to a large extent availed itself of this freedom. When, however, we are assured by those who have tried one system that the results are in the highest degree satisfactory, and by those who, strongly disbelieving in this system, have tried one very different that their own results are almost ideal, we may reasonably conclude that the lessons of educational experience are very hard to read, or else that there is no great difference in methods and studies in secondary education. Men whose feelings are strongly enlisted in favor of a particular system will be slow to see that it is not entirely satisfactory; while how to compare fairly the results of different methods is one of the most difficult problems of education. So much depends upon the individual himself that, under any system, pupils will grow up to be men and women who will play their parts in life very much according to their abilities. Stimulus and example count for so much, also, that it is better to have a poor course of study with the living force of a great teacher behind it, than a faultless curriculum with mediocre instruction.

In the present condition of American education, there can be no great harm, indeed, there may be considerable advantage, in having quite a variation in the high school courses designed to fit pupils directly for life. But the practical advantages of having a uniformity in the requirements for admission to college are very great. Almost every college has some peculiarities in its requirements; and when a school has to prepare pupils for several colleges, as most schools do, it is almost sure to give them a poorer preparation than if they were going to a single institution. The advantages which can be gained by any college from insisting upon any special point in its entrance requirements are so small that it can well afford to sacrifice them for the greater gain to be obtained from a uniform course.

The classical course in most secondary schools is modeled after the general requirements for admission to college. It is remarkable that colleges do not have a course whose requirements for admission are the subjects taught in secondary schools in courses which are not classical. Colleges which desire a large number

of students bid for them with special or technical courses, or with courses whose requirements for admission are not very substantial. Colleges would largely increase their number of students, and do real service to the cause of education, if they offered a course of study such that the requirements for admission would be the subjects ordinarily taken by students in secondary schools who have no definite intention of pursuing their studies further. A large number of pupils in the high school wake up to the fact that a college education would be a good thing for them ; but they find no course adapted to the work which they have been doing, and the eager American desire to lose no time in life's race prevents them from turning back in the work of preparation. A better articulation between the high school and the college in courses of study not classical is greatly needed ; and a well considered effort to bring about this articulation would materially help in solving some of the problems of secondary education.

In all our discussion of the readjustment of the school curriculum, it is well to remember that society is being constantly modified, that we are living in a period of rapid and often unforeseen changes, and that, as education is to fit men to live the life of their time, all arrangements must be more or less provisional. If we are seeking for an ideal curriculum, we shall fail, as the wisest men in all the ages past have failed. A healthy discontent with our present circumstances and work is wise, but it is also wise not to be too discontented. No practical system of education produces ideal results, and it is very easy to criticise present work from an ideal standpoint. The reformer in education always has the advantage. The actual results produced by present arrangements are not as good as they might be ; and, as the substitutes proposed have not been subjected to the crucial test of actual practice with the weak and stubborn minds of children, it is easy to predict that under the new system there will be no friction, and that the calculated results are sure to be obtained. This is a time of progress and of great pedagogical activity ; but we must not, after all, expect too much of it. Any arrangement of our work will not greatly change the mind and character of the child, which is our permanent factor of resistance. The path of the schoolmaster in this generation and in the next is sure to be set with thorns.

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